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Helene P. Foley: Female Acts in Greek Tragedy

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Introduction

What is it about women that interests Mr. Jacquot? “I was born a man,” Mr. Jacquot said, “and women are a part of humanity that is at once familiar and very, very strange to me. It’s difficult for a man to ask the question, what is a man. It’s as if the question just doesn’t arise. Or as if we already know the response, and it’s not necessarily amusing. But a woman can ask herself the question, what is a woman. I try to respond to that question with the female characters I invent and the actresses I film. And they always lead me to further questions.”

(French filmmaker Benoit Jacquot, New York Times, August 2, 1998)

GREEK tragedy was written and performed by men and aimed—perhaps not exclusively if women were present in the theater—at a large, public male audience.¹ Masculine identity and conflicts remain central to the enterprise, but the texts often explore or query these issues through female characters and the culturally more marginal positions that they occupy. Such indirection is basic to the genre as a whole. Tragic plots borrow from the whole repertoire of Greek myths, often myths about cities other than Athens, and the plays take place in the remote past. The heroic kings who dominate the cities of Greek tragedies no more directly reflect the leaders of Athenian democracy than the active and assertive women who make public choices and determine the outcome of the plot of so many Greek tragedies resemble their more restricted Athenian counterparts. At the same time, in part through deploying deliberate anachronisms or overlapping features of the fictional past and the lived present, the tragedies provoke an implicit dialogue between present and past,² and the enduring fascination of these stories of powerful aristocratic families for a democratic *polis* (city-state) requires explanation.

The study of tragic women is both more limited and in a sense more elusive than that of tragic men. Tragedy at least makes a pretense of knowing what

¹ On the question of women’s presence in the theater, see most recently Podlecki 1990, Henderson 1991, and Goldhill 1994. I am of the opinion that a limited number of (perhaps predominantly older or noncitizen) women were present along with metics, foreigners, and slaves, but that the performances were primarily aimed at citizen men.

² See esp. Vernant 1981 and Easterling 1985.

women are and how they should act, and has a repertoire of clichés to draw on in describing them. As a category, women are a “tribe” apparently less differentiated as individuals than men; paradoxically, they are both more embedded in the social system and marginal to its central institutions.³ Ideally, their speech and action should be severely limited, since they are by nature incapable of full social maturity and independence (see III.1). At the same time, tragedy generically prefers representing situations and behavior that at least initially invert, disrupt, and challenge cultural ideals. Although many female characters in tragedy do not violate popular norms for female behavior, those who take action, and especially those who speak and act publicly and in their own interest, represent the greatest and most puzzling deviation from the cultural norm.

These female interventions would be less puzzling if they could be explained simply as inversions of the norm designed to be cautionary demonstrations of the cultural consequences of stepping out of line. Yet, as we shall see, this is not consistently the case; and even when it is, the repercussions of female speech and action and the ways in which they are represented raise an unexpectedly broad and disconcerting set of questions. For this reason, recent critics, including myself, have hypothesized that female characters are doing double duty in these plays, by representing a fictional female position in the tragic family and city and simultaneously serving as a location from which to explore a series of problematic issues that men prefer to approach indirectly and certainly not through their own persons.⁴ In this sense, the female acts investigated in this book are fe(male) acts designed not only by but for men.

Women played a significant role in Athenian culture as reproducers of children, as participants in public and private religious rituals and festivals, and as caretakers within households. Their most important and active tragic interventions tend to reflect these realities, but with a critical difference, since female characters can exercise an independence and a latitude not, at least ideally, permitted to them outside fiction. This book looks first at the tragic representation of women in burial ritual, above all as lamenters of the dead (I), and second, at male and female responses toward and attempts to negotiate the contradictory marriage system that heavily governed Athenian private lives (II and IV). The third and largest part (III, 1–6, the core of the Martin Lectures) deals with ethical interventions by women at different stages of their reproductive lives (as virgin, wife, and mature mother) in the form of choices made or attempts to persuade others to act in their behalf. Each part lays the historical and interpretive groundwork for its own section, but the issues discussed in earlier sections continue to play a role in later ones. Thus, for example, III.2 deals with the *ethics* of women’s role as lamenters of the dead in Sophocles’ *Elec-*

³ Loraux 1978. In tragedy, however, they can, due to their very marginality, represent a more complex perspective than male characters (Zeitlin 1996: 363).

⁴ See esp. Just 1975 and 1989, Gould 1980, Foley 1981, and Zeitlin 1996, esp. 1985a.

tra, and III.4 takes up the challenge made by Clytemnestra to the institution of marriage. Part IV, which addresses Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Helen*, brings together all the themes of the book but with a special focus on marriage.

In the case of each of the major topics discussed in this book we have evidence external to tragedy, especially in prose texts, that these were areas that the culture recognized as not only central but somehow problematic in relation to women. Starting from the archaic period, for example, Athens more than once attempted to control and curtail women's public role in death ritual (I). The emerging city also passed legislation concerning marriage and inheritance and evidence for tensions over and violations of these legal restrictions appears throughout the classical period. For example, Pericles' citizenship law of 451–450 B.C.E, which restricted citizenship to those with two citizen parents, apparently lapsed and was re-passed in 403; inheritance law, which aimed to insure the continuity of each household, including those left only with female heirs, met with abuses and controversies that emerge repeatedly in fourth-century court cases (II). Finally, women were not allowed to exercise legal autonomy; hence they normally did not make significant social and economic choices without the supervision of a guardian. Yet philosophers can raise questions about the advisability of women's extreme ethical subordination, and court cases allow us to catch glimpses of women exercising greater autonomy within the household than we might have expected from Athenian ideology (III.6).⁵

The discussion of tragedy in each part of the book takes place in the context of this historical evidence, and permits us better to understand how tragedy deviates from or responds to cultural norms. Thus, as we shall see, tragic lamenters may violate or be forced to conform to the restrictions of the funerary legislation, tragic men and women may escape or implicitly confront the limits of Athenian marriage and inheritance law, and tragic women may make significant and sometimes public choices (commonly but by no means exclusively relating to self-sacrifice or revenge) in the absence of male guardians.⁶ Although the plays do not allow their audience to forget the limits imposed on women in real life,⁷ the interventions of female characters go beyond being caution-

⁵ Among the many forms of power, formal or informal, secular or ritual, overt or covert, power exercised singly or jointly, one would expect women to exercise informal, ritual, covert, or shared power in Athens, whether or not this was openly acknowledged.

⁶ Hall 1997: 106–9 and McClure 1999 stress that tragic women generally make important decisions in the absence of guardians. Yet we do hear of autonomous decisions, such as Alcestis' choice to sacrifice herself for her husband, that occurred with his knowledge. Moreover, Helen in Euripides' *Helen* first expresses willingness to die and then plans the couple's escape in the presence of her husband Menelaus, and Iphigeneia's choice to sacrifice herself in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* is made before Achilles, if not her father.

⁷ See Foley 1981: 135, Harder 1993, and Seidensticker 1995. Harder usefully attempts to survey in detail the degree to which Euripidean women conform to gender expectations or go beyond them; even those who attempt to take action are frequently unsuccessful at accomplishing their goals.

ary examples of the dangers of permitting independence to women. Because we have access to the cultural clichés and the expectations that defined women for men, examining their role in tragedy allows us to address a more limited and accessible issue than we would encounter in looking at male roles in the same genre and to begin to define more fully what kind of response tragedy is making to the environment in which it was performed.

Conceptions of Tragic Women

Before returning to a more detailed discussion of the approaches that I adopt in this book, I would like to review briefly scholarly progress on conceptions of tragic women to date. The earliest phases of this investigation were largely historical. Scholars puzzled over a range of apparently contradictory evidence on the subject of Attic women, and especially their seemingly anomalous representation in drama.⁸ Leaving aside women's strikingly assertive and even rebellious behavior, the pervasive presence of female characters on the public stage in a society that preferred its own women to have as limited a public reputation as possible was even in antiquity something of a surprise.⁹ As early as the second century C.E., the writer Lucian (*De Saltatione* 28) commented that there were more women than men in these plays; Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Clitophon* (1.8) remarks on the many plots women have contributed to the tragic stage, as they kill the men they love or hate; only one extant tragedy lacks a woman (Sophocles' *Philoctetes*) and female choruses outnumber their male counterparts in the remaining plays (twenty-one to ten).¹⁰ Moreover, tragedy apparently expands on and often makes more controversial the roles that mythical women played in archaic literature.¹¹

By now, the probable relation between life and the tragic stage is better understood; the gap between drama and what we believe to be lived reality exists, but we can envision it on terms that make fiction part of the same social universe.¹² From a generic perspective Greek drama does not directly reflect

⁸ See esp. Gould 1980, Foley 1981, Blok 1987, Versnel 1987, Rabinowitz 1993, Blundell 1995, Fantham et al. 1994, and Seidensticker 1995, all with earlier bibliography. As A. W. Gomme famously remarked (1925: 4), "There is, in fact, no literature, no art of any country, in which women are more prominent, more important, more carefully studied and with more interest, than in the tragedy, sculpture, and painting of fifth-century Athens."

⁹ On female reputation, see esp. Thucydides 2.46, Gorgias 22 Diels-Kranz, and Lysias 3.6. In court cases witnesses could be summoned to confirm the identity of a respectable wife (Demosthenes 43.29–46 and Isaeus 8.9–10), and the names of living women were mentioned in court only if the orator aimed to cast suspicion on them (Schaps 1975).

¹⁰ See Hall 1997: 105.

¹¹ Foley 1981: 133.

¹² As Roger Just put it in a pioneering article (1975: 157), woman in drama is a "cultural product" and an "ideological formation" that must be situated "within the semantic field formed by Athenian society."

contemporary life but a remote, imaginary, and aristocratic world that often deliberately inverts or distorts the cultural norm; on the other hand, such inversions testify to an implicit norm, and tragedy often either reminds its audience of or abides by contemporary standards. Thus female characters can be admonished to stay in their place within and keep silent; men express outrage at a female challenge; aberrant women are labeled as masculine.¹³ Finally, the Athenian audience must have experienced these female characters in a fashion that grew out of their psychological, political, and social lives.

On the one hand, Attic women were formally excluded from the political and military life of their city; this exclusion was important given the particular significance that Athens' radical democracy placed on participation in public life. They could not attend assemblies, serve on juries, or even speak in court. Nor did they receive the kind of education that would have permitted them to do so.¹⁴ Tragedy, even though it is set in the remote past, largely respects these restrictions with occasional exceptions. Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, for example, is imagined to have exercised power legitimately during her husband's absence at Troy and she later becomes coruler of Argos with Aegisthus; characters like Euripides' foreign Medea or his priestess' daughter Melanippe (*Melanippe Sophe*) lay claim to a remarkable feminine wisdom and many tragic women argue with great rhetorical sophistication.

Although a citizen wife was necessary for the production of legitimate children, women were not registered at birth as citizens in the city's phratries (clans).¹⁵ Their "citizenship" was exercised not politically but religiously. Priestesses of many important cults were citizen women, and the form of female participation undertaken in a range of civic cults could depend on citizenship.¹⁶ Tragic women sometimes seem to confine their horizons strictly to a domestic world, but others clearly view themselves as citizens and even act for their state. Antigone and Ismene clash over exactly these priorities at the beginning of Sophocles' *Antigone* (see III.3). Euripides' sacrificial virgins (III.1) and persuasive mothers (III.6) can pointedly subordinate family to civic concerns. Tragedy thus implicitly adopts a more inclusive and symbolic view of citizenship than those historians who stress a strictly political definition.¹⁷

¹³ See, e.g., Euripides' *Phoenissae* 88–95, 193–201, *Electra* 341–44, *Heracleidae* 474–77; Sophocles' *Antigone* 484–85; and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 11.

¹⁴ Attendance at the theater, at the Homeric recitations at the Panathenaic festivals, and at other festivals that included myth-based songs and dance would have given women, if they attended them, an oral education. Yet knowledge of reading and writing was probably limited (Cole 1981). Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* 7.5–6 suggests that even a girl's domestic education was minimal.

¹⁵ On the question of female citizenship, see esp. Patterson 1986.

¹⁶ See esp. Turner 1983. Osborne 1993 indirectly supports this point.

¹⁷ Osborne 1997 has argued that the growing prominence of women on both white-ground lekythoi (oil flasks) and funerary stelai represents a new emphasis on the importance of the dead to the family circle and testifies to the legitimate citizenship and reproductive capacities of wives and mothers. Sixth-century funerary stelai stressed aristocratic male public achievement.

The respectable, citizen women of the middle and upper middle classes about which our sources provide the majority of the evidence ideally spent their lives indoors or with women in the immediate neighborhood and were primarily oriented to domestic affairs.¹⁸ Even shopping or fetching water was generally done by men or slaves. Yet women also came out of the house frequently to attend religious events and were aware of much that went on in the public world. Tragedy occurs outside the stage building and thus putatively, and sometimes pointedly, stages its women in public or religious spaces. Nevertheless, as Easterling and others have stressed,¹⁹ the plays often treat the spaces before the stage building as in essence domestic and women generally do not stray far from the stage doorway.

As lifelong legal minors, Attic women were meant to make important decisions under the supervision of a guardian (*kurios*), although they could and apparently did exercise influence on family matters concerning adoption and inheritance and may have offered opinions on public affairs (see III.6). Women married young and ideally did not choose their spouses, manage their dowries, divorce without the approval of their kin, or conduct financial transactions over the value of one *medimnos* of barley (enough food to sustain a family for several days). Tragic women, however, frequently make important autonomous decisions, often in the absence of male guardians, and can deliberately flout the authority of their men. Thus tragedy apparently deliberately violates cultural norms, but many of these female decisions (though there are glaring exceptions) involve domestic rather than public life.

Although the gap between tragedy and reality remains critical to evaluating the tragic response to the Attic environment in which it was performed, this focus has ultimately proved to be a less interesting way of getting at the provocative and interesting aspects of tragic women than studies of how the plays use these aspects to think about a range of issues.²⁰ I outline the major contributions to this second approach briefly here. The remainder of the book also includes contributions made in articles or book chapters that illuminate our understanding of the representation of women in specific Greek tragedies as well as more specialized studies.²¹

Early Greek thought often relied on binary oppositions. In the Pythagorean table of opposites, for example, male is linked with limit, odd, one, resting, straight, light, good, and square and female with unlimited, even, plurality, left,

¹⁸ See note 7. Given the limited role of lower-class women and slaves in tragedy, I do not dwell on their status here, except in my discussion of concubines in part II. Poorer women probably participated in agriculture and certainly sold goods at markets. See Aristotle, *Politics* 4.1300a; see also 6.1323a.

¹⁹ See esp. Padel 1990, Easterling 1988, Seidensticker 1995.

²⁰ See Zeitlin 1996: 1–18, esp. 8, and Foley 1981.

²¹ For other important studies, see esp. Loraux 1987 on modes of female death in tragedy and various essays in her 1995a, all of Zeitlin 1996, Harder 1993, and Hall 1997.

curved, dark, bad, and oblong (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5.986a). Taking a cue from the prominent male-female conflicts and polarizations of Greek tragedy, early work on the conception of women in tragedy explored the significance of the structural equations male:female as culture:nature and male:female as public:private/domestic.²² My 1981 essay on the conception of women in Athenian drama argued for the relevance of this approach with some substantial qualifications. First, although tragedy can represent women as more closely linked with “nature” or the supernatural than men, both tragic men and women align themselves at various points with what the texts define as nature or culture, mediate between them, or attempt to transcend natural and cultural limits; moreover, the tragic sense of these mutually defined terms does not remain stable over time and is often contested.²³

Second, it is precisely because neither sex is firmly aligned with household or state that tragic conflicts become so complex and messy and tensions arise both within and between public and private worlds. As I put it then: “Both men and women share an interest in the *oikos* and in the values that help it to survive. But each sex performs for the *oikos* a different function, each requiring different virtues, and acts in separate spaces, one inside, one outside. Each sex also shares an interest in the *polis*, and performs different public functions that help to perpetuate the state, the male political and military functions, which exclude women, the female religious functions. In each sphere the male holds legal authority over the female. When men and women participate in state religious festivals, each sex supports the communal values necessary for the welfare of the state. *Oikos* and *polis* are organized on a comparable and complementary basis, although they differ in scale. . . . What this means is that the simple equation female:*oikos* as male:*polis* does not hold fully on the Greek stage even at the level of an ideal.” “Yet occasionally we catch a glimpse of a more complex, reciprocal model” that “helps us to define a norm against which to read the inversions and aberrations of drama.”²⁴

Too radical a privatization and cultural isolation of the female and what she represents, however, might create an imbalance between the needs, values, and interests of domestic and public spheres.²⁵ The tragic concern with binary opposition responds in part to the heavy demands that the democratic *polis* put on the male citizen to “subordinate private interests to public, while simultaneously encouraging ambition and competition. The result, drama seems to suggest, is a constant failure of the male to stay within cultural limits. Female characters often make a radical intrusion into the breach, either to expose and challenge this failure, or to heal it with transcendent sacrificial and other reli-

²² Tragic play with gender categories can often blur any clear definition or opposition, however. See Zeitlin 1996, esp. 15.

²³ Foley 1981: 140–48.

²⁴ Foley 1981: 153–54, 161.

²⁵ Foley 1981: 151.

gious gestures.²⁶ If the female uses religious powers to serve household or state, or to mediate between ‘nature’ and culture’ as these two terms are defined by a specific text, the result can be positive. Otherwise the intrusion of a being ill-equipped for political life can be as dangerous as the disasters that provoked it, the female becomes the locus of oppositions between ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ household and state, and the dramas close with the punishment of the female intruder that implicitly reasserts the cultural norm. The relatively more limited and defined role in which the female is confined by Athenian culture can thus be used to define the more inclusive male role by contrast.”²⁷

Marilyn A. Katz recently offered a valuable expansion on the structuralist approach, arguing that opposition between the sexes also “operates in the construction of self in tragedy, where the language of sexual difference functions as the mechanism through which individual character is precipitated into existence within the drama.”²⁸ Yet although I stand by the general thrust of the argument that I made in 1981, structuralism by itself remains both too schematic and generalizing to get at the complexity of the language, overt content, and evolution of individual texts and neglects other possible levels of analysis, such as the psychological. Philip Slater, for example, has argued that the powerful, and often threatening, women of Greek drama find their origin in the pathological psychosexual experience of the Athenian male child.²⁹ The social and political seclusion of the Greek mother makes her alternatively hostile to her more liberated son and seductive to him in the absence of a father rarely at home. The adult male—narcissistic, pedophilic, and obsessively competitive—thus remains uncertain of his sexual identity and abnormally ambivalent toward mature women. This analysis proved valuable in identifying an important set of psychological and sexual tensions in Greek tragedy, but failed to encompass the full range of psychological conflicts portrayed in Greek tragedy or to account for the complex unfolding of its narratives.³⁰

Froma Zeitlin developed a far more sophisticated analysis of the ways that “playing the other” on the Greek stage permitted an exploration and expansion of male identity.³¹ A form of initiation into the mysteries of what the culture defines as the feminine other—the tensions, complexities, vulnerabilities, irrationalities, and ambiguities that masculine aspiration would prefer to suppress or control—tragedy imagines “a fuller model for the masculine self.”³² “Even when female characters struggle with the conflicts generated by the pe-

²⁶ On the role of the “female intruder” in tragedy, see Shaw 1975 and my response in Foley 1982a.

²⁷ Foley 1981: 162.

²⁸ Katz 1994b: 100.

²⁹ Slater 1968.

³⁰ See further Foley 1975 and 1981: 137–40 on Slater.

³¹ Zeitlin 1996.

³² Zeitlin 1996: 363.

cularities of their subordinate social position, their demands for identity and self-esteem are still designed primarily for exploring the male project of selfhood in the larger world. . . . But *functionally*, women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama on stage. Rather, they play the role of catalysts, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers, sometimes helpers or saviors for the male characters.³³ When prominently presented, they may serve as antimodels as well as hidden models for that masculine self and concomitantly, their experience of suffering or their acts that lead them to disaster regularly occur before and precipitate those of men.”³⁴ Thus the male body becomes “feminized” through tragic suffering and madness and more vulnerable to pity or forgiveness; the tragic male confronts and recognizes within himself the powerful secrets that the female brings outside the house; she also controls the tragic plot, manipulating “the duplicities and illusions of the tragic world”³⁵ and precipitating the activity of forces beyond male control.

Building on Zeitlin’s approach, Nancy Rabinowitz, Victoria Wohl, and, most recently, Kirk Ormand made the symbolic exchange of women the starting point for their studies of tragic women.³⁶ Using a variety of modern theorists, including Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Freud, Foucault, Althusser, Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, Gayle Rubin, and Theresa de Lauretis, and, in Wohl’s case, also Lacan, Melanie Klein, and Judith Butler, all three scholars examine how the plays structure audience reaction to impose gender hierarchy, suppress female subjectivity and desire, and legitimate the sex/gender system of the time.³⁷ As Lévi-Strauss argued, the exchange of women by men establishes culture and defuses hostility among men. Disruptions in the system of exchange entail an attack on male subjectivity, which relies on it, and a demystification of the fundamental system of male bonding, including gift exchange and host-guest relations (*xenia*).³⁸ In the disrupted world of tragedy the exchange of women begins to dissolve, not cement, social bonds, and men are turned from subjects to objects (above all, dead bodies).³⁹ For Rabinowitz, there are two basic models of tragic women: the sacrificial and the vindictive. Female sacrificial victims are represented as freely choosing death and fetishized,⁴⁰ whereas active female resisters must be punished for their threats to male children. As both Rabinowitz and Wohl argue, father-son or homosocial bonding occurs over the body of the repressed woman, and the fantasy of reproduction without women rears

³³ Zeitlin 1996: 347. Griffin 1998: 45–46 completely misreads this passage.

³⁴ Zeitlin 1996: 347.

³⁵ Zeitlin 1996: 357.

³⁶ Rabinowitz 1993, Wohl 1998, and Ormand 1999. Ormand stresses (18) that “it is when women are most analogous to objects of economic exchange that marriage becomes least stable.”

³⁷ See esp. Rabinowitz 1993: 14 and Wohl 1998: 179, 182.

³⁸ Wohl 1998: esp. xxviii, 178, 182.

³⁹ Wohl 1998: xv.

⁴⁰ Rabinowitz 1993: 23 and Wohl 1998: xxviii.

its head more than once on the tragic stage: “The divisive female subject is rejected and reduced; her murdered body becomes the token in the Oedipal identification between father and son, a fetishized gift that binds men to one another.”⁴¹ Ormand stresses the failure of marriage in Sophocles to offer women any sense of fulfillment or completion, whether subjective or objective; virgins fail to attain marriage, while married women long endlessly for an ever-receding intimacy or the opportunity for further children.

Both Rabinowitz and Wohl attempt to modify slightly this largely bleak picture of tragic gender relations. Rabinowitz postulates the possibility of a subversive reading by female members of the audience (if they were present), especially through Euripides’ perhaps unintentional acknowledgment of female strength.⁴² For Wohl, tragedy reveals the artificiality and violence of the systems that it eventually reaffirms; the eloquent silence of the virgin who has not yet been exchanged thus becomes a potential site of resistance beyond the dominant symbolic system.⁴³

I conclude with a brief mention of Synnøve des Bouvrie’s massive study, which takes what she calls an anthropological and Aristotelian approach to understanding the prominent role of women in drama. For des Bouvrie, tragedy does not present “a problem or a discussion of values” or dramatize “alternatives to be reflected upon,” but “unarguable truths through a ‘symbolic’ medium.”⁴⁴ “The meaningful level of dramatic action, together with all the means of rousing the emotions, served the function of marking off the values and boundaries of social life and charging them with emotion.”⁴⁵ “Embodying aspects of the central institutions of Athenian culture [the *oikos*, marriage], these [tragic] females manifest their ‘symbolic nature,’ disrupting or corroborating the complex of values on which these institutions rest, bringing home their absolute, unquestionable and—then and there—‘universal’ truth.”⁴⁶ My fundamental disagreement above all with the first of these propositions, that tragedy does not question as well as produce and reinforce Athenian ideology, has reduced the influence of this book not only in my own work but on those of others already discussed.⁴⁷

Approaching Female Acts

Greek tragedies are undeniably androcentric and do indeed provide poetic justification for the subordination of women, foreigners, and slaves. The voices and freedom to act with which drama endows women may in fact, as Zeitlin,

⁴¹ Wohl 1998: 179; see also Rabinowitz 1993: part III.

⁴² Rabinowitz 1993: 26–27. See my review of Rabinowitz, Foley 1995c.

⁴³ Wohl 1998: xv, xvii, xxi–xxii, xxxii, xxxvi–xxxvii, 180, and 182.

⁴⁴ Des Bouvrie 1990: 170.

⁴⁵ Des Bouvrie 1990: 127.

⁴⁶ Des Bouvrie 1990: 325.

⁴⁷ For further discussion, see Foley 1995a: esp. 143.

Rabinowitz, Wohl, and Ormand suggest, largely serve this same end despite appearances to the contrary. Ancient viewers, however, seem to have caught a glimpse of the disruptive effects that tragedy's abuse of Athens' far more conservative social mores on gender might have had on its audience. In Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the poet Aeschylus complains that Euripides has made tragedy democratic by allowing his women and slaves to talk as well as the master of the house (949–52). Plutarch (*De Audiendis Poetis* 28a) objects to the highly rhetorical accusations made by Euripides' Phaedra and Helen (in *Trojan Women*), and the Christian writer Origen reports that Euripides was mocked for endowing barbarian women and slave girls with philosophical opinions (*Contra Celsum* 7.36.34–36; see Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.1454a31–33, discussed in III.1). Plato complains of the dangers of the theatrical impersonation of social inferiors such as women and slaves and of feminine emotions (*Republic* 10.605c10–e6). A genre that relies on dialogue and endows characters of subordinate and marginal status with speech and action poses especially difficult problems for interpretation. I share both Wohl's limited optimism that tragedy's demystifications of Athenian institutions can still attract even the most skeptical members of a modern audience and Edith Hall's optimistic argument that tragedy, despite its hierarchical world view, "does its thinking in a form which is vastly more politically advanced than the society which produced" it.⁴⁸

Moreover, nothing requires the modern feminist to identify with tragedy's sometimes rebellious but finally subordinated women, as long as she remains fully conscious of the dynamics that put these characters in their place. Both the male protagonists in Greek tragedy and the male citizens of Athens faced in different ways negotiating conflicts between public and private worlds and identities and creating some coherence between them, challenging the limiting stereotypes of gender roles in order to accommodate to reality, maintaining boundaries and self-control in a competitive and increasingly complex economic and social environment, or balancing the need in a democracy for both egalitarian opportunity and sensitivity and the need for superior leadership. All these problems are now faced by twentieth-century women as well as men, and both women and men can now find themselves in the position of creating and enforcing social and political ideology.

I myself remain more interested in the concerns of Aristophanes, Plutarch, and Origen. Why do women talk (and, I would add, act) so eloquently in tragedy, and what is the function of their masculine rhetoric and philosophizing? In my 1981 article, I closed with an enumeration of unfinished questions. Among these was the question of how the representation of women in drama relates to the social and intellectual issues central to the genre and how it differs in the plays of the three major poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. *Female Acts* represents a return to those unfinished issues. I wanted to under-

⁴⁸ Hall 1997: 125.

stand both how tragic women were used to think about the social order and how they helped men confront intractable social and philosophical problems. The more I studied plays, the more I became convinced that they differ considerably in the way that gender contributes to articulating social and historical issues and that these changing responses are partly to be explained by larger historical shifts precipitated by events such as the Peloponnesian War, and partly a question of the dramaturgy of the different poets in a complex variety of plays. I began by looking at what women argued and did in various plays, and tried to locate their positions both in the plays as a whole and in relation to contemporary historical tensions. Only then did I turn to modern discussions in anthropology, history, or philosophy, both in order to propose possible ways of filling in gaps in our knowledge and/or to put Greek views into some comprehensible and useful relation to our own.

The central areas where women intervene in the tragic action involve death, marriage and inheritance, and the making of difficult ethical choices. Historically, this is not surprising. A society that aimed increasingly over the sixth and fifth centuries to preserve the individual household but subordinate it to the state needed to manage grief. But the privatizing of individual funerals and the self-controlled glorification of the war dead in Athenian public funerals did not necessarily leave enough room for the recognition of suffering and loss involved in individual deaths. This need was likely to have intensified as the losses of the Peloponnesian War were prolonged over a period of nearly thirty years. Tragedy presented a form of public lamentation for individuals that may have obliquely compensated an audience deprived of the full pleasures of expressing grief. Moreover, women historically played the role not only of physically lamenting the dead but of expressing and even acting on views that from Homer on challenged public ideology about death and glory. Tragedy conveniently puts such dissent into female mouths yet, as the century wore on, also made a point of curtailing or limiting it.

As noted earlier, court cases make clear that families sought ways around the restrictions of Greek marriage and inheritance law. Tragedies not only confront some of the contradictions and problems of the marriage and inheritance system and demonstrate their catastrophic repercussions, but offer imaginary escape routes from these same problems and contradictions. In particular, tragic plots involving concubines, unwed mothers, and symbolic remarriages offered a kind of nostalgic return to the less restricted, aristocratic world of Homeric epic. Insofar as these familial issues are implicitly linked with the larger tensions in Attic democracy between the democratic masses and the aristocratic elite whom the masses both feared and relied on for stable leadership, these domestic issues can serve obliquely to illuminate a public set of historical tensions as well.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ As Zeitlin 1996: 2 puts it: "In such an anthropology of gendered relations, the aesthetic, the social, and the ethical inevitably assumed a political complexion, which brought new insights to bear on the workings of the polis and the making of civic identity."

The overdetermined world of tragedy intensifies the audience's sense that making ethical choices involves the unknowable and the uncontrollable both within and outside the self; yet at the same time divine forces offer the hope of making some kind of larger sense out of human plans and errors. Negotiating public and private priorities in ethical choices is a central problem in tragedy. Equally complicated is the question—a question that I try to show is implicit in the views that clash in a number of plays—of whether public and private morality should operate on the same terms and, if not, what kind of bridge can be created between them. Both Greek popular culture and tragedy in some respects give different social, emotional, and ethical roles to men and women. Choices look different from within a female social role or position than they do for men and may seem to require a different balance between reason and emotion or among other various considerations; they may even demand a different ethical style. Tragedy gives voice to choices or persuasive arguments made from a perspective it defines as female (e.g., those of all three tragic Electras; both tragic Antigones; Euripides' two Iphigeneias; and his Aethra, Hecuba, and Jocasta), or sometimes (as in the case of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra or Euripides' Medea) as androgynous, as well as male. Defining a tragic perspective as gendered entails explicitly drawing attention to a character's female or androgynous status; women more often use the higher emotional register of lyric meter in representing themselves than men; in some cases the specific language, gestures, arguments, or perspectives (including the various ethical modes discussed in III) used by a character are linked to gender.⁵⁰ The clash between these voices can change or blur the audience's perspective on larger issues, such as justice or the function of human law, and bring into the forefront neglected or marginalized political and social concerns; the reconciliation between gendered ethical positions, on the other hand, can pave the way to broader social unity.

Due to the complex nature of the topic, I have been forced to restrict the range of my discussion of the representation of tragic women in various ways. I make no pretense to an inclusive study, because all of the issues under consideration play a role in so many tragedies and I aim to locate my discussions in the larger dramatic environment of each text. Yet I do try to make clear why I have emphasized a particular selection of texts. For reasons of both space and theoretical clarity and consistency, I cannot deal with all the possible levels and implications of the questions I explore. Studies such as Edith Hall's *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, which treats the role of barbarian women in tragedy, Laura McClure's *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*, and Joan Connelly's forthcoming study of Greek priestesses also played a role in limiting the scope of this book.⁵¹ In particular, McClure's important study, which appeared too recently for full incor-

⁵⁰ On language, see McClure 1999.

⁵¹ Hall 1989 and McClure 1999.

poration into this book, isolates speech genres closely identified with women, such as gossip, rhetorical and seductive persuasion, lamentation, and other forms of ritual speech. She then examines how female speech in tragedy on the one hand disrupted, deceived, and seduced and on the other “served as a means of representing the problems of discourse within the democratic polis”⁵² and of commenting on the potential of contemporary rhetoric to undermine the power of the aristocratic elite.⁵³ I have also deliberately acknowledged but excluded from detailed consideration the kind of important psychological or identity issues addressed so extensively by Zeitlin, Rabinowitz, Wohl, and Ormand. The complex roles of gods, myth and ritual, and choruses are included in the discussion at times, but are never—although they deserve to be—the focus of investigation.

Finally, I can do more than recognize the highly controversial questions of tragic characterization and of the relation between history and tragedy. I try to avoid treating tragic characters with post-nineteenth-century assumptions about dramatic characterization.⁵⁴ Greek characters are very much the product of the particular theatrical conventions of the ancient stage: the changeless continuity of the mask; elaborate costumes that do not resemble ordinary dress; the public setting before the stage building; mythical plots and exotic or historically remote locales for action; stylized gesture; the changing media for linguistic expression, such as sung lyric, formal speeches, or dialogue (*stichomythia*), each with their own conventions and levels of emotional intensity.⁵⁵ It is generally difficult to separate Greek characters from the action, from the social roles and expectations of their community, from the effects of the dialogic form of drama, in which each character is defined in interaction with others, and from the rich language and metaphorical systems of the plays.⁵⁶ Moreover, due to apparent discontinuities in characterization, some scholars have questioned whether tragic characters can even be said to occupy a coherent position within the dialogue and action of the play.⁵⁷ What seems clear is that we cannot treat such characters as individuals with a life offstage, a private and idiosyncratic self, or a subconscious. I have not been able to account for all the forces at play in creating the characters that I discuss—the topic deserves far more study than it has received up to this point—and I have, due to my focus on agency, been forced to confine myself largely to aspects of charac-

⁵² McClure 1999: 28.

⁵³ McClure 1999: 29.

⁵⁴ On tragic characterization, see esp. Garton 1957; Jones 1962; Gould 1978; Easterling 1973, 1977b, and 1990; Goldhill 1990; and Gill 1986, 1990b, and 1996.

⁵⁵ On these aspects of Greek characterization, see esp. Garton 1957, Jones 1962, Gould 1978, and Goldhill 1990.

⁵⁶ See esp. Gould 1978, Goldhill 1990.

⁵⁷ See von Wilamowitz 1969, Gould 1978, and the helpful response to these doubts by Goldhill 1990: 112–14 and Easterling 1990: 84, 92–93. See Goldhill 1990: 111 n. 32 for further references.

ter that appear to be less discontinuous and more dependent on the actual motives and rationales offered by the characters themselves in the course of the unfolding action. Moreover, because of the historical and anthropological emphasis of this book, I also give considerably more attention to defining and examining the demands made by a range of social roles (virgin, wife, or mother) on a character's actions than to the influence of chance, fate, and the gods.

Defining agency for characters in Greek tragedy is difficult enough by itself, but the problem is compounded in a context where any independent action by a female, whether in drama or reality, defies ordinary cultural expectations and is potentially problematic or suspect. Moreover, tragedy, as Christopher Gill has stressed, tends in its representation of action and motivation to be ethically and socially exploratory or interrogatory, rather than, as in some philosophical texts, affirmative.⁵⁸ Not only tragic choices by women, but tragic choices between two rights or two wrongs are cases in point. Tragic characters may view themselves as undertaking intentional actions for which they may be viewed as responsible and judged accordingly. Yet at other points the character herself, the chorus, or another character may view her action as partly determined, or even in the case of madness entirely determined, by gods, or inherited curses and dispositions, or even separate internal forces within the self (see Euripides' *Medea* in III.5). On yet other occasions, actions and their causes and motives remain inexplicable; such actions invite empathy, awe, or fear but are dramatically beyond any certain human judgment.⁵⁹ Although from this perspective it may be impossible to view a character as autonomous, I have retained the term "autonomous" in my discussion of those passages in which a character sees herself as taking deliberate action for which she is willing to be held accountable,⁶⁰ and where she or others see her as adopting the relatively greater social independence of the Greek male.

I consider tragedy's relation to its historical context to be general and oblique rather than topical or allegorical.⁶¹ As an integral part of the city's public and religious life, tragedy can reinforce, justify, or sometimes even articulate the civic life, ideology, social and political roles, and distribution of power in democratic Athens; yet it can also—and this is increasingly the case as the fifth century wore on—raise questions about these same issues. Through its representation of conflict and its agonistic speeches and dialogues, tragedy can negotiate if not resolve critical tensions between public and private life or be-

⁵⁸ Gill 1990: 18–19.

⁵⁹ See esp. Gill 1986, 1990b, and 1996.

⁶⁰ Characters generally view themselves as accountable for actions that they recognize to have been partially influenced by divine or other external or warring internal forces. See III.4 and III.5.

⁶¹ On the relation between tragedy and politics, see most recently, two collections of essays, Goff 1995b and Pelling 1997; Griffin 1998, which queries recent treatments of the topic (see also the reply of Seaford 2000); and Saïd 1998, which reviews the issues and contains an up-to-date bibliography. The useful discussion in Pelling 2000, esp. chs. 9–10, reached me too late for inclusion in this book.

tween traditional aristocratic and democratic views, values, and interests, and give us a sense of what problems were of gripping interest to its audience. By representing and referring to rituals and by giving a public voice to those who were normally silent in the political arena but more active in domestic and religious life—women, slaves, foreigners—it can open fresh perspectives on and restore some balance to a civic life and dialogue otherwise dominated by citizen males.

The issues under discussion in this book that tragedy addresses—about death ritual, marriage and inheritance, or ethical choice and argument—are important topics in the literature of both the archaic and classical periods. Tragedy often (and sometimes pointedly) either imitates epic or addresses these issues differently. The form and content of Greek tragedy are above all products of the mythical tradition, the performance context, and a developing and changing set of generic and specifically literary concerns. Yet a knowledge of historical shifts and problems may help to make a particular tragic articulation of or emphasis on a topic to be more comprehensible and more profoundly related to the culture out of which it came.